

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Through the Eyes of a Child: The Many Aspects of Environmental Justice

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I REMEMBER THE MOOSE. The moose was standing in the dappled sun of a late Wyoming afternoon and it stood squarely in the middle of a path between my five-year-old feet and a patch of huckleberries. As a five-year-old from Brooklyn New York, the moose represented such otherness that the tableau—moose, berries, shafts of sun, and my dusty Pro-Keds sneakers—has remained crystal clear for decades. In my mind, that moose represented everything different from my city home and everything pivotal to the career I ended up choosing.

What is environmental justice? When asked this question, most people refer to low-income neighborhoods where health impacts are the primary concern and the environment is a surrounding that is evil, with toxins moving up the food chain and concentrating in human populations. However, here, in this special edition of *The George Wright Forum*, we take a step back and define environmental justice through the eyes of a child. Environmental justice is the access to curiosity in discovering the sweetness of huckleberries, the challenge of hiking a dusty trail in battered sneakers, and the indomitable barrier of a moose in the middle of a path. From curiosity to exposure to stereotypes, we need to explore the barriers that make access to environmental resources, such as huckleberries or a

moose, more difficult for some ethnic groups to achieve than others.

What is the concern for environmental justice? The American public is rapidly changing and the environmental challenges facing our nation's protected areas are increasing. Early on, the history of the environmental movement moved in a different direction from the common experience of ethnic groups such as African Americans or Native Americans. The National Park Service Act of 1916 was passed 25 years after the battle at Wounded Knee; ten years after the enactment of Jim Crow laws in the South, and within 25 years of the lyrics made famous later on by Billie Holiday: "*these trees, what strange fruit they bear...*" The Wilderness Act of 1964 was within a year of the Civil Rights Act of 1963. Yet it

wasn't until the end of the tumultuous sixties that the idea of parks and access to resources for even the urban poor was articulated—not by the grand names, like Leopold or Muir, often associated with parks and preservations, but by the release of *The Race for Open Space* in 1960 by the Regional Plan Association in New York City. The tie between urban development and decay and the coining of the term “open space” was the start of a movement recognizing that urban dwellers—often poor and minorities—needed recreational opportunities near by to cure urban ills. People connect to parks through reflection, recreation, and even gardening in ways that were beneficial to the urban lifestyle. The 1978 addition of recreation areas to the management units of the National Park Service were intended specifically to address the goal (as articulated in 1971 by the Advi-

sory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments) of “providing outlets for urban frustration and constructive activities for youthful energies ... we have an obligation to give these people the chance to share in a bit of open space and fresh air.” Yet to this day, most minorities associate parks with fear, crime, a feeling of being unwelcome, and an uncomfortable history.

In the following collection of papers, the authors explore two related questions: What is environmental justice, and how does it relate to natural resources? And: Why is the connection to open space important to all people? This question was first posed in the scholarly work *Justice and Natural Resources* (Mutz, Bryner, and Kenney 2002) where environmental justice was explored in the context of natural resources themselves rather than environ-





mental toxins. The idea of fairness of access and other social inequalities was noted not only in terms of where parks are but how they are maintained and managed. Clearly, the equitable access to natural resources, or even the right to make traditional use of those resources (as was granted in the case of Alaskan Natives) did not exist in all communities, so the question of justice, as clearly outlined by a 1994 executive order by President Clinton, was that the environment was to be equally accessible for all Americans. The papers presented here examine that access, starting with a broad presentation of typical stereotypes to personal stories and interviews.

The first broad step is an understanding to how the demography of the United States is rapidly changing around our parks. Hispanic populations are exploding in the Southeast while African Americans

are appearing in states as remote as Montana (Peterman, this volume). As these populations change around the parks, the stakeholders involved with the parks and impacted by management actions, has also changed. In a recent study of Northeast parks in the Northeast, my colleagues and I found that many parks were surrounded by communities whose Hispanic populations had increased by more than 200%. In contrast, parks in the western states, such as Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, showed less change in Hispanic population, but a dramatic shift in the population age as retirees moved into the area. As these demographics shift, the stakeholders also shift and the relevancy of parks to those local populations is declining (Schuett and Bowser, this volume).

The second step in exploring environmental justice is the issue of curiosity and

acceptance. Three papers here emphasize the issues of youth and their ability to explore natural resources and be comfortable. Henry F. Howe reviews the cultural roots of ecology and current ecological paradigms to explore their role in introducing youth to ecological curiosity. Then, Corliss Wilson Outley explores her research on children within inner cities and discusses their views of environmental quality and how their perceptions affect the use of open spaces. These articles mirror recent news releases in the media regarding the decline in park visitation, and also touch upon new technologies, like podcasting and cell phone stations, that fundamentally change how visitors experience parks.

The goal of this collection of papers is to encourage reflection. Environmental justice is not the simple siting of toxic sources near one neighborhood or another. Environmental justice is also about the open access—perceived or hidden—of all people to America’s natural resources. If we connect only one culture to that environmental history, we risk the alienation of a rapidly growing majority. It is instructive to reflect that the youth interviewed by Outley will be the generation managing the parks in the year 2016—the hundredth anniversary of the National Park Service. It is sobering to

think that the parks whose nearby communities have the fastest-growing Hispanic populations don’t have basic regulatory signs in Spanish, and yet those are the stakeholders who will be voting for that park’s budget in 2016. Imagine, as we head towards the centennial celebrations of the founding of the National Park Service, that the management *and* visitors to parks must look very different from the current employees and visitors for parks and protected areas to survive. A failure to recognize the complexity of perceptions this new group of citizens will have towards parks, and the barriers created by those perceptions, can be as fatal to the parks themselves as the perceived overcrowding of the 1990s and the current challenges of global climate change.

But lastly, remember the moose. As a young African American from an urban jungle, that moose was a barrier between me and the desired huckleberries of my future. By 2016, all inner-city youth should have access to such huckleberries, so that they in their turn can become stewards, and look forward to sharing the day when they take their five-year-olds’ hand and lead them carefully down the dusty trail, past the moose, to the treats beyond.

Reference

Mutz, Kathryn, Gary C. Bryner, and Douglas S. Kenney, eds. 2002. *Justice and Natural Resources: Concepts, Strategies, and Applications*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

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